

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE GLOBAL PRESERVATION OF SACRED SITES

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This is the text of the message of His Holiness Aram I addressed to the *International Conference on the Global Preservation of Sacred Sites*, 9-12 November 2001, Taipei, Taiwan.

I send to you my greetings in the spirit of the unity of humankind from the headquarters of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia of the Armenian Church, in Antelias, Lebanon. I also greet the Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao, the founder of the Museum of World Religions and the initiator of the Global Commission for the Preservation of Sacred Sites. I consider this gathering of eminent representatives of world religions and different spheres of society, of particular importance as it takes place at a critical point of human history. In fact, conflicts, tensions, socio-economic evils and the deterioration of moral and spiritual values have led the world to new uncertainties and complexities. Humanity is in search of new meaning and identity, new direction and vision.

I firmly believe that religion has a pivotal role to play in this context. It reminds the governments and civil societies the crucial importance of spiritual and moral values for the life of human community and promotes peace with justice, human dignity and human rights, the God-given gifts of humanity. I also believe that religion, as a major force in the life of society, is called to play an important part in combating the evils that in different ways and forms, endeavor to impose their dominance everywhere. Hence, this Conference on Global Preservation of Sacred Sites is a promising step on the quest to give more visibility and efficiency to the role of religion in the life of contemporary societies. In this context, I consider the dialogue and collaboration among the religions of the world vital and urgent.

According to the program, this panel will address the following theme: *Religions and the Preservation of Sacred Sites*.

At the outset of my few remarks, I would like to state clearly that religious sites are not merely monuments or places of special importance. They are sacred by their nature and scope; they are sacred by their very mission. I want to share with you a few perspectives and experiences emerging from the tradition of my Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church.-

1) Religious sites are sacred because we believe that God-humanity dialogue takes place in these places. In fact, we consider the church the most sacred place in Christianity. It is the temple of God, the place where God dwells, where God reveals

Himself and invites humanity to engage in communion with Him. This is why we consecrate the churches and religious sites. We also consecrate all the objects and materials that are used in our religious sites. We believe that, with consecration, these geographical realities are transformed into new realities by acquiring a new quality, a new meaning and vocation. Furthermore, we believe that in these sites people become united and are sustained by divine presence.

2) Religious sites express the cultural values of a people. They are built by a given people in a given place and time. They bear the identity, traditions, values, the suffering and hope, the dreams and vision of a people. Culture embraces the totality of the inner and outer worlds of a people. Religious sites vividly and authentically manifest the peculiarities and specificities of a culture, and the suffering and hope of a people. They are the living testimonies of the cultural heritage of a people.

3) Faith is not a conceptual notion; it is an expression of the inner yearnings and aspirations of a human being. It requires structure to articulate itself in human society. Religious sites are concrete manifestations of the spiritual values, traditions and desires of communities of faith. Hence, their significance goes beyond their cultural importance and geographical confines. Religious sites constitute the spiritual treasures of a faith community.

4) Religious sites are the guarantors of the continuity and identity of religions, cultures, civilizations and nations. Through them the historical continuity of a faith community is assured, and the specific identity of a community is safeguarded in time and space. Through religious sites the community is built and empowered spiritually and morally.

Therefore, religious sites belong to all humanity. They are the spiritual richness of all humanity and, as such, they must be preserved, they must be kept intact and remain a source of veneration. Religious sites must become instruments for the promotion of spiritual and moral values, of love and reconciliation, of justice and peace in this world.

My church and my people have attached a special importance to religious sites. In the course of our history many invaders have destroyed our churches, chapels, centers of pilgrimages. Our people have renewed and built new ones. In fact, we have built the house of God before our own houses.

I want to draw the kind attention of this Conference to the fact that hundreds of Armenian religious sites have been totally or partially destroyed, desecrated and used for non-religious purposes, in the eastern and southern parts of Turkey that used to be for centuries a major center of the Armenian Church and the people. In fact, in 1915, during the First World War, the Turkish-Ottoman government of the time planned and executed a Genocide against its Armenian population. One and a half million Armenians lost their lives and the rest were dispersed all over the world.

It is vitally important that the religions of the world join their forces to preserve the sacred sites of all religions. I believe that we can do that by deepening the mutual respect, understanding and trust among religions, by working together for justice and human rights, and by combating the evil forces that dehumanize humanity and destroy the creation of God.

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**

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